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Three Separated Views of Thelonious

I have been writing about Monk almost as long as I've been writing about music; he was quite possibly the most important artist I have been associated with and undoubtedly a primary influence on my career as a producer. I've tried to show both his initial and continuing roles in my life by the three-part selection of material included here.

To begin with, there is the published result of the night when I first met Monk in Alfred Lion's living room and rather naively proceeded to interview him. Considering all circumstances, the article is nothing to be ashamed of, and several of my observations remain impressively acute. The piece is reprinted almost without change—with one repeated exception. In the original his first name was invariably misspelled; the error is a common one about which I have for many years sneered at many other people: omitting the final "o" in Thelonious. I insist on correcting it here.

Seven years later, I began a six-year period as Monk's record producer. The second segment consists of excerpts from my liner notes for half a dozen of our albums together; these comments and observations have the unique immediacy of having been written very shortly after the fact by someone who was very much involved throughout the recording process.

In recent years, I have written liner notes for a variety of Monk reissues, as well as several magazine remembrances after his death. Spread through all of these were a number of points that I considered important and, inevitably, a certain amount of repetition of thoughts and anecdotes. But I remained somewhat frustrated;

there was never enough room to bring together in one article everything I had to say on this subject, and there very possibly never would be.

But there was to be a happy ending. Eventually I was asked to assemble an ultimate reissue—a twenty-two-record boxed set with the awesomely definitive title, "Thelonious Monk: The Complete Riverside Recordings." (It's worth noting that, although it was subsequently released in this country, the project was initially commissioned by the company that has leased the *Japanese* rights to the records! Actually, the highly informed and rather possessive attitude of those fans towards American jazz is in itself a most fascinating subject.) In addition to compiling the set, I undertook to write the suitably extensive accompanying booklet. This material, a reminiscence followed by a session-by-session review of all my recording experiences with Thelonious, makes up the third and by far the longest portion of this chapter. In its own way, this overview is itself a "complete Riverside Monk," and it comes very close to being that hoped-for full recapitulation of my thoughts and remembrances and conclusions about this nearly incredible man. So it was particularly gratifying when the reissue set as a whole, and the booklet on its own, were both honored with 1987 Grammy awards as, respectively, Best Historical Album and Best Album Notes.

(The session recollections have been edited in places, but only to remove what would otherwise be rather cryptic and confusing comments referring directly to the recordings.)

The Original Interview
1948

Modern music has been rolling along these past few years, converting a number of young jazz men and often making for them a good bit of money. Sometimes it seems like a very sincere, if immature and frenetic, jazz form; sometimes it gives off strong hints of un-artistic neurosis, commercial power-politics, and childish clowning. I have always been ready to concede, without too much enthusiasm, that bebop might well have a bright future, but until recently had found nothing in it capable of commanding interest or respect.

Very recently, however, what looks very much like the first ray of light has broken through the clouds. A thirty-year-old New York pianist named Thelonious Monk has cut several band records

(only four sides have been released as yet) containing music that is more interesting and worthy of far more serious listening than anything else that has yet been produced by a modernist. Monk, who has been a legendary and little-known figure in bebop circles, plays in a style that bears a strong superficial resemblance to standard bop. But there are indications that his music may represent a huge forward step towards discipline and coherence in this newest form of jazz.

Comparison with past jazz greats is probably pointless; the various "schools" of jazz may go through similar periods of development, but each has its own peculiarities. However, it may serve to clarify Monk's relative position along the main stream of modern music to point out that he is engaged in developing an essentially original piano style, as men like Pinetop Smith and CowCow Davenport did for an earlier style. In his current record he has created a band style molded around his own ideas and shaped to his own manner of playing, much as Jelly Roll Morton and Duke Ellington did before him.

Monk was unquestionably one of the very first to play in the modern style that came to be known as bebop. In 1938, while playing in a quartet at Minton's, in Harlem, he and drummer Kenny Clarke began "thinking" in that vein, and even before that Monk had been picking up a meager living by playing around town in his natural style—a strange style that most musicians found incomprehensible.

For reasons to be touched on later, Monk's conception of jazz has developed along somewhat different lines than his Harlem contemporaries—stronger and more mature lines, in our opinion. Possibly because Thelonious is the first pianist with his own set of ideas to come along in a type of jazz thus far dominated by horn men like Parker and Gillespie, his recent sides are the first "modern" records in which the piano and the rhythm section play important roles. Monk himself complains that bebop pianists have a habit of trying to imitate Dizzy's trumpet or Bird's alto; a piano that fulfills a piano's function in the band is a rare thing, but Monk's strongly rhythmic style is pure piano, beautifully integrated into a unit with his bassist (Eugene Ramey on some sides, Bob Paige on others), and with a powerful, steady and complex drummer named Art Blakey.

A great weakness peculiar to recorded jazz, and a weakness common to all schools, is the haphazard and casual business of bringing together men relatively unfamiliar with each other's styles in a hastily arranged pick-up session. Sometimes this produces

great jazz; more often the product is rather disorganized music. Even if it includes great solo work, it still sounds like what it really is—a group of individuals playing in the same room, but *not* a band. On the occasions when units composed of men who understand each other's styles and ideas and peculiarities are able to get together, the results are likely to be superior, even if the individuals involved are not "all-stars." New Orleans jazz has many examples of this; the Ellington band is another case in point. Modern music thus far has been largely pick-up; the fact that Thelonious chose the men he wanted to work with, and rehearsed carefully with them, may be a major reason why his current records are an outstanding example of unified small band jazz, and sound purposeful and coordinated instead of like a cutting duel between comparative strangers.

Unfortunately, it seems to have been easier for Thelonious to find rhythm men able to adapt themselves to his style than to find suitable horns. Trumpet and tenor sax on his current sides are played by men who seem too steeped in standard bebop; their solos sometimes fail to follow the complex pattern being established by the rhythm unit, and the ensembles tend, on occasion, to fall into standard bop clichés. But one man, a seventeen-year-old alto player named Danny Quebec West (nephew of Ike Quebec), does some remarkable work. He has a firm, clear, driving style, and, apparently because he is young enough not to have fallen into current stylization, he is able to coordinate with the line along which Monk's playing moves.

Whether Monk is to become a "great," and whether his music is really as far from the beaten path of bebop as I believe it is, are things that only time and continued playing can prove. But, as of this moment, considering only the present batch of far-from-perfect records turned out by this still-young jazz man, these points stand out:

Thelonious is a talented musician, with a fertile imagination and a firm rhythmic sense; his band jazz has a feeling of unity, warmth, and purpose that contrasts sharply with the emotionless, jittered-up pyrotechnics of Fifty-second Street "modernism." And—although this is a point that cannot be proved in writing but only heard in the music—he is capable of a sly, wry, satiric humor that has a rare maturity. Monk's playing may be considered as "neurotic" as the rest of the jazz produced in the '40s, but it at least serves to indicate that the music of a neurotic era does not necessarily have to be a collection of cold, rhythmless and pointless sounds.

One of the principal reasons for Monk's "differentness," aside

from the man's own probable genius, can be found in the way that choice and necessity have combined to keep him on the fringes of the bebop movement. Raised in the semi-isolated San Juan Hill district near the Hudson River in New York's West Sixties, he has lived there, away from Harlem, ever since. He started taking piano lessons at eleven, and two years later was playing solo dates at local parties and speakeasies. From the first, Monk says, "no written music sounded right" to him, although he obviously listened intently to the Ellington band of that day. His unconventional style and his unwillingness to play standard orchestra piano kept him from band jobs and led him to develop his style his own way. Those early years were undoubtedly not pleasant ones; Thelonious is a quiet, self-contained, and soft-spoken man, who doesn't seem too anxious to recall those first jobs in "juice joints," where he made $17 a week, and where people kept wanting him to "play straight."

"There are a lot of things you can't remember—except the heckles," he says.

Finally, in 1938, he went into trumpeter Joe Guy's quartet at Minton's. In those days, when "everybody was sounding like Roy Eldridge," he and Kenny Clarke began "thinking out" the style that was to be promoted into a big thing called bebop. ("Thinking" is a word Monk uses a lot in talking about his music, and to me the word seems fitting.) A great many men drifted into Minton's and into that style in those days: Charlie Christian, Coleman Hawkins, Dizzy Gillespie (whom Monk remembers as having been there only "very rarely"), Charlie Parker.

In 1940 Thelonious recorded an album with Hawkins, on the Joe Davis label. It's interesting to note that, although the balance and the arrangements on those sides were set up to feature only Hawk, what can be heard of Monk's playing is in the same vein as it is today. Not as sure or as forceful, perhaps, but clearly along the same lines. Then came two years with Hawkins's band, in Chicago and on the West Coast, which meant that he was not on hand during the period when "bebop" (which incidentally is a term he dislikes) was first being stylized and strongly plugged.

Then he returned to New York and comparative obscurity. Always appreciated by fellow musicians (like Mary Lou Williams, Ellington, Nat Cole—who says he sat "spellbound" the first time he heard Thelonious), but never quite in harmony with the kind of jazz that was being sold, he was completely without the qualities of showmanship and self-promotion in which so many others abound. A careful craftsman and an artist, he is obviously not a man who

would be at his best in a quick recording session or be happy playing chords on a six-night-a-week job with an outfit that considered the piano a half-necessary background for some free-wheeling horn men.

His current sides, on which his particular variation of modern music is played with varying degrees of success, but with not-infrequent greatness, may or may not move him from obscurity to a position as a big name and big influence in modern jazz. But they do show that at least one modernist is capable of a maturity and soundness and brilliance that leaves room for much optimism for the future of jazz.

Some Notes from the Trenches 1955–60

A good part of the problem of the jazz artist who is considered excessively far-out is tied in with the playing of material that is unfamiliar to the "average" ear. This is not to deny that original compositions are an important part of jazz creativity. But it can be extremely helpful to know the precise structural and melodic starting point of a musician's improvisations. It can often mean the difference between following the unfolding of a performance with awe and delight or finding yourself just groping, bewildered, and almost inevitably somewhat irritated. Communication between performer and audience is, after all, rather essential; and to perhaps more listeners than might care to admit it out loud, the initial identification of knowing the tune can be something more than half the battle.

(from "Thelonious Monk Plays Duke Ellington"; Fall 1955)

Monk concerns himself here with standards—popular tunes that have demonstrated sturdiness and above-average quality by remaining popular for a good many years. The present group of numbers are decidedly personal interpretations, strongly colored by Monk's highly individual approach and ideas. But the starting point in each case is a familiar melody.

This is a departure from the procedure on his earlier recordings, where the emphasis was invariably on the pianist's own compositions. Monk's originals, it happens, are among the richest and most inventive of modern jazz writing. Nevertheless, the decision to bypass them temporarily is a quite deliberate one. It stems from a

desire to deflate a myth that has gotten somewhat out of hand. For a variety of reasons, and starting (as most legends do) from a basis of moderately accurate fact, this pioneer modernist has gained the reputation of being a rather forbiddingly difficult-to-understand musician (the "High Priest of Bop"—whatever that might mean). As a result, there are those who shy away from Monk's music almost automatically, who have decided without *really* listening that it is something they can't expect to grasp or enjoy. It is our very strong belief that such people are cheating themselves, and missing out on valuable and compelling musical experiences.

If it were their loss alone, there might be no great desire to divert these people from their self-imposed fate. But some part at least of the measure of an artist's "effectiveness" must lie in the extent of his impact on an audience. Thus Thelonious—whose influence on fellow-musicians and on the whole basic framework of modern music is, by contrast, vast and almost universally recognized—must also be considered as losing something.

In this album and its immediate predecessor, there is no attempt to "change" Monk. (There could be no possibility of doing that even if anyone wanted to: this is a mature and properly self-confident artist whose fundamental musical concepts are by now quite firmly established.) But Thelonious is highly capable of working with the material furnished by the standard pop composers. More than that, he happens to enjoy (as some jazz artists do, and others do not) the challenge this can present. So it is possible to put into operation the theory that the likelihood of communication is greatly increased if the listener can start from a firm, familiar position. *You* know the tune of "Liza," or "Honeysuckle Rose," as well as Monk does. So everyone at least begins even. Thelonious can never be made to seem too "easy"; he is a forthright and uncompromising creative artist whose style and concepts remain non-conventional even by the standards of today's jazz. He is *not* easy, but neither is he a mystical or perverse wanderer in a private universe. And when the point of origin from which he moves on out is clearly understood, it should be a lot easier to feel that this music, intricate and unusual though it may be, is nevertheless knowable.

(from "The Unique Thelonious Monk"; Spring 1956)

Monk's music is not only not the easiest listening, it is also not the easiest to play. Musicians could save themselves a lot of trouble by *not* recording with Thelonious—but it's a form of trouble that a great many of the best have long considered a privilege (as well as

an education in itself). The men—Sonny Rollins, Max Roach, Oscar Pettiford, Ernie Henry, Clark Terry, Paul Chambers—struggled and concentrated and shook their heads with those half-smiles that mean: "Hard? This is *impossible!*" Because Monk's creativity never stands still: during a preliminary run-through of a number, between takes or even during one, changes of phrasing or detail will evolve, as a constant fusion of arrangement and improvisation keeps taking place.

Monk is a severe task-master at a recording session, a perfectionist—"I've never been satisfied with one of my records yet," he says, and means it—who knows just how he wants each note bent and phrased and who drives the others as hard as he drives himself—which is possibly a little unfair of him.

In the end, it wasn't "impossible"—merely far from easy, and in the end everyone else was satisfied and Monk probably almost satisfied.

(from "Brilliant Corners"; January 1957)

Any musician who has had the experience can verify that it is hard work to play with Thelonious; even the many who admire him deeply do not always find it possible to grasp fully or execute perfectly the intricate and demanding patterns that Monk's mind can evolve. This does not mean that Monk playing by himself is a "perfect" situation, but what *is* special about this album is the rare opportunity to hear Thelonious as he thinks and sounds when he has chosen to be temporarily complete in himself.

The overall tone is reflective, and there is a good deal of a sometimes deceptive feeling of searching, while playing, for an idea to explore, of almost unexpectedly finding in a single note or phrase the impetus for a full chorus that follows. This is a feeling that often gives Monk's playing here a quality of thinking-out-loud. It isn't that he sounds unprepared, or surprised by the directions he takes; it is rather as if he were constantly discovering and rediscovering within himself both new and remembered patterns of music.

(from "Thelonious Himself"; Spring 1957)

One of the most important points to be noted about this debut performance by the Monk Orchestra is that it celebrates the fact that Thelonious is still at it—still creating and building as ever, still refusing to stand in one place and let the world catch up with him. More precisely, he is refusing to let the world, once it has caught up, *stay* abreast of him for very long.

In this respect, Monk is merely justifying the frequent description of him as a "pioneer." If I remember my history, it was the habit of that noted frontiersman, Daniel Boone, to establish a new settlement and then, when it had developed into a properly domesticated village, to strike out into the wilderness again, in further search of new territory and sufficient elbow-room.

Like many analogies, this puts things a little too patly. However, it is quite accurate to point out that whole cities of Monk fans and followers have now sprung up where once, not at all long ago, he existed almost in solitude within what many regarded as an impenetrable musical wilderness. For almost two decades, Monk has been developing a body of musical composition, performance, and influence that now clearly marks him as a truly gigantic creative figure. But for most of that period, the majority of listeners and critics, and even some musicians, considered Thelonious to be at best a frighteningly far-out and difficult artist, at worst an eccentric of small merit who played the piano incorrectly. Then, with a surge that made it seem as if a dam had broken somewhere, he was "discovered." Suddenly (and rather gratifyingly) things were turned around, and in most jazz circles it was the anti-Monk element and the shoulder-shruggers, rather than his partisans, who were considered the odd-ball minority. I think it was partly that a dam *had* burst: exposure to his work (in 1957, for the first time in many years, Thelonious became regularly available to New York night club audiences), and to the work of many increasingly popular musicians strongly influenced by him, had finally eroded the barrier that separated so many people from him. It was partly that Monk himself, seeming almost to thrive on public indifference, had been constantly growing as an artist until he reached a point where it was literally impossible to ignore him any longer.

At any rate, 1958 was a year of attention and honors: of good reviews and feature articles and high standing in popularity polls. Which made it quite fitting that at the end of the second month of 1959, Thelonious offered the first public appearance of something new. The full, pervasive sound of this orchestra seems to me a long overdue extension of his music, but as some concert reviews have indicated, there will be those who do not approve of this new step. I welcome the return of controversy to the world of Monk's music—I really think he belongs at least a little apart from overwhelming acceptance and may even function more creatively when he is out on the frontier building something that the multitudes of settlers can accept fully whenever they are able to catch up.

(from "The Thelonious Monk Orchestra at Town Hall"; Spring 1959)

The artistry of Thelonious seems to have an almost infinite number of facets. Each of his albums offers some combination of several of them, but none can show the total complex picture. This is of course all to the good: too many jazz musicians (as well as performers and creators in many other fields) show us their whole hand all too quickly and then show it to us again and again—possibly deepening and maturing, but inevitably repeating themselves at least somewhat and therefore becoming at least somewhat less surprising, challenging, or interesting. But the artist who can never be considered completely knowable or predictable always retains a touch of magic. He is a wizard, a poet, and so we always turn to his latest effort with a thrill of anticipation and wonder.

(from "Thelonious Monk at the Blackhawk"; Spring 1960)

The Complete Riverside Recordings
1986

Thelonious and Me

It should be clearly understood that the purpose of this collection is to present to the greatest possible extent the complete results of the six-year association between Thelonious Monk and Riverside Records. This is not at all the same as merely reissuing all the albums he made for that label, or even offering the material from those albums plus a scattering of alternates takes. The intention here is something I consider much more personal, more revealing, more historically and musically significant. This is, basically, all of my work with Thelonious, including several of the accidents and the failures as well as the highly important creative moments. Except only for the tapes that have vanished (and must be assumed to be lost forever, accidentally or unthinkingly destroyed), it is the full and naked truth about several pivotal recording years in the career of a very major jazz artist, which means that it is at times something quite different from the carefully packaged entertainment units that the public is usually allowed to purchase.

Therefore, this is also a very important segment of my life-long involvement with the creation of jazz records. Monk was the first artist of real consequence with whom I went into the recording studio. Although I have never felt there was any point in comparing one valid artist with others, I must admit that it is entirely possible that he was the most important musician I have ever worked with. Certainly he was the most unusual, probably he was

the most demanding. Undoubtedly I learned more from him than from anyone else—at least partly because our association began so early in my career that at the time I knew practically nothing and therefore had almost everything to learn! It was in some respects a most rewarding working relationship, but it was at times extremely frustrating. We last worked together in 1960, and therefore I had two decades before his death in which to think with regret of projects we might have done or should have done.

Above all, however, I will always retain a feeling of satisfaction. Over the years it has come to be my personal definition of the role of the jazz record producer that he should serve primarily as a *catalytic agent.* In a literal sense, my dictionary refers to this as something that "initiates a chemical reaction and enables it to proceed under different conditions than otherwise possible." In a jazz sense, I mean that the producer's job is to create, in whatever ways he can, a set of circumstances that will allow and encourage the artist to perform at the very highest level. I first attempted to function in this way on my early sessions with Monk, and I do feel that at least some of the work I helped bring into being was truly different and lastingly valuable, and that without my involvement it might not have been quite the same.

Monk and I first met a very long time ago. It was early in 1948, only a few years after he had been involved in the pioneering bebop sessions at Minton's Playhouse in Harlem. As I like to point out in recalling that initial encounter, it was so incredibly long ago that I was still several years away from producing my first album, and Monk was poised at the very beginning of his recording career. Specifically, Blue Note was preparing to release his first 78-rpm single, and I had just made a formal (although unpaid) entrance into the jazz world by becoming the managing editor of a small and previously quite traditionalist magazine.

It was precisely this combination of roles—Thelonious as a new recording artist and me as a totally inexperienced jazz journalist—that was responsible for our being brought together one evening, thereby setting in motion a chain of events that eventually led to our intense six-year working relationship at Riverside and to the creation of all the recordings that make up this collection. I was twenty-five years old at the time and Monk (if his listed birthdate in 1917 is accurate) was just past thirty, but there was considerable difference between us. Even though the outside world was not aware of Monk, his reputation in certain jazz circles as the eccentric "high priest of bop" was already well established. I, on the

other hand, was merely a beginning jazz writer who was editor of *The Record Changer* simply because my former college classmate Bill Grauer (who was later to be my partner at Riverside) had just become publisher of the magazine. But Alfred Lion, the guiding force at Blue Note, had seen an opportunity to influence us newcomers into publicizing his unusual young pianist. So I found myself sitting in Lion's living room, not only meeting this already-legendary musician but attempting to interview him.

My first real problem was to understand what he was saying. In later years I developed the theory that Monk had several different ways of speaking: to strangers, or if his mood was withdrawn, there would be a thick and murky tone that made it necessary to strain for each word. As he came to know you better and to accept you, his speech patterns gradually became clearer. I remain convinced that in speech (as in his music) Thelonious for the most part became easier to comprehend only when and if he wanted to. At our first meeting, facing an intrusive young writer that his record company had thrust at him, he retreated behind a wall of grunts and mumbles and one-word answers.

Nevertheless I kept at it and somehow—possibly because I have always been stubborn, or because I had the arrogance that can come from ignorance and was too inexperienced to be properly frightened of him—I succeeded in putting together what Monk later told me was the first article about him ever to appear in a national publication. He may have been wrong about that: there was a George Simon story in *Metronome* at about the same time, and that magazine certainly had a much larger circulation. But the really important thing was that Thelonious liked what I had to say and remembered it; seven years later, that had a lot to do with my becoming his record producer.

On re-reading that original *Record Changer* piece a great many years later, it is clear that I responded immediately and strongly to this man and his strange music. At that time I was still very much a traditionalist, with virtually no knowledge of the new jazz forms; I had not yet heard anything attractive in the bebop of Gillespie and Parker. As I wrote in that article, I had previously found modern jazz to be "frenetic, emotionless, and rhythmless." Nevertheless, I found myself highly impressed by the test pressings I heard that night from Monk's first Blue Note session. I remember most clearly the original version of the tune called "Thelonious" (which was to be recorded again for Riverside, almost exactly ten years later, in a big-band concert performance). And the total impact of

what I heard led me to some initial comments that, quite astonishingly, I would still be willing to affirm today, close to forty years later!

Calling his first records "an outstanding example of unified small band jazz," I used such phrases as "discipline and coherence" and "purposeful and coordinated." I noted his "warmth," his "firm rhythmic sense (and) fertile imagination," and found him "capable of a wry, satiric, humor that has a rare maturity." Most remarkably, when you realize how much of a novice I was back then, I was able to perceive that "he is engaged in developing an essentially original piano style," and that in those first recordings he had "created a band style molded around his own ideas and shaped to his own manner of playing, much as Jelly Roll Morton and Duke Ellington did before him." I continue to feel that to appreciate properly Monk's work and his position in jazz history it is essential to understand that he stands in a direct line of succession from Morton and Ellington. The fact that I grasped this basic point on first hearing him not only speaks well of my jazz instincts but also points up the clarity with which Monk's message has always been delivered—to those who are willing to listen with open ears.

However, for seven years I had no occasion to make use of my early insights. Although I had begun to enjoy a good deal of the new music that was all around me in New York, and by 1953 had become professionally involved in the record business, the young Riverside label at that time was almost exclusively concerned with reissues of early classics by Louis Armstrong, King Oliver, Jelly Roll, and Ma Rainey. Then, early in 1955, we received a momentous telephone call from Nat Hentoff, informing us of the possibility that Thelonious might be available for recording.

Monk's career had not been progressing well. He could not work to any extent in New York clubs; several years after a minor narcotics-related conviction, he was still unable to obtain from the police department the "cabaret card" that was required under the arbitrary regulations that were then in effect. He had moved from Blue Note to Prestige Records a couple of years earlier, but his records were not doing well with either the critics or the public—perhaps at least in part because of the rather overdone publicity emphasis on the weirdness and obscurity of his music. Monk was quite unhappy with Prestige, and they did not consider him at all important in comparison with the label's top-selling attractions like Miles Davis and the Modern Jazz Quartet. Prestige, we were informed, could easily be persuaded to release Monk from his contract.

Grauer and I responded with great enthusiasm. We had made the decision to get heavily involved in recording contemporary jazz; to sign Thelonious would not only be a strong starting point, but would certainly let the jazz world know just how serious we were. We met with Monk, and I was very pleased to learn that he knew exactly who I was and remembered quite clearly and approvingly what I had written about him. Having very little to lose, he was willing to take a chance with the fledgling Riverside operation, particularly since it was run by the men responsible for that article. It did take a touch of trickery to free him from Prestige. All that was required was repayment of an absurdly small sum of money that had been overadvanced to him, but the label might not turn the pianist loose quite so casually if they were aware that a rival company was standing by. So I personally lent Thelonious the necessary funds, and I still have on my wall a framed copy of the letter informing him that "with receipt of your cash for $108.27," Prestige was "releasing you of your exclusive recording. . . ." It was the start of a very exciting and significant period, the beginning of the first of my several long-term associations with major jazz artists. It opened the door for our many record sessions together, several of which were of great importance to his career and unquestionably to mine, and to the overall story of jazz in our times.

Signing this genius was not hard; recording him was never easy. When I entered a studio with Monk in 1955, for the first of a great many times, I was quite inadequately prepared for the task. Like many of my colleagues at the independent jazz labels of that era, I was a fan who had become a producer by the simple procedure of declaring that I was one. I was one of the owners of the company, so who could argue with my claim? But I know now that I, as an executive, would never entrust so important, difficult, and sensitive an artist to a producer as thoroughly inexperienced as I was then. I had handled a few sessions, with studio musicians and with pianist Randy Weston (who was a disciple of Monk, but has always been one of the gentlest of human beings). Such a background in no way prepared me for working with this erratic, stubborn, basically intolerant, and overwhelmingly talented artist. I was at the beginning of a massive learning experience!

Sonny Rollins, with whom I have often discussed the everfascinating subject, shares my belief that Thelonious was a great teacher, and that we both have absorbed very important (although certainly very different) lessons from him—despite the obvious fact that he was undoubtedly the most unorthodox and indirect of teachers and never in his life gave either of us (or anyone else) a

formal lesson. Sonny, who has spent some time in India, has referred to Monk as his "guru," and this is perhaps a more accurate term than "teacher," since he functioned less as an instructor than as a guide who helped you bring out the very best qualities within yourself. As examples, I am aware of how he aided Rollins in developing both his musical sense of humor and his ability to play ballads in a way that combines beauty with emotional strength; I also know how greatly John Coltrane's several months with Thelonious at the Five Spot in 1957 accelerated his transition from a rather interesting young bebop tenor player into an unconventional, boundary-extending giant. Above all, I remain deeply conscious of the extent to which my early sessions with this brilliant, difficult, and demanding man literally forced me to learn very quickly under pressure a great many necessary and valuable skills and attitudes and some essential truths about dealing effectively with a great variety of jazz artists.

My first problem—and it was an almost symbolic preview of what my future as a producer would include—came on the scheduled first day of recording with Monk, and involved the absence of a reputedly quite reliable musician. Kenny Clarke and Oscar Pettiford, both already recognized as among the elder statesmen of the new music, were the carefully chosen sidemen for this initial album. We were all to gather at the small Riverside offices in midtown New York and travel together across the Hudson River to the New Jersey studios of Rudy Van Gelder, the most celebrated of jazz engineers. I was relieved when Monk arrived almost on time, just after Pettiford, but Clarke was nowhere to be found. We waited with growing impatience and concern; we telephoned everywhere; eventually Thelonious suggested using a substitute. Ironically, his choice was Philly Joe Jones, who in later years was to be Riverside's most frequently used drummer, but I had barely heard of him, and did not want to begin by being pushed into using an unknown in place of an acknowledged master. Van Gelder agreed to give us a one-day postponement; Kenny, when finally located, insisted quite convincingly that Monk had told him the date was scheduled for the next day. It was not the last time that Monk was to indicate a lack of concern for such routine things as time and place and passing on the kind of basic information that is important to ordinary people.

Looking back on that album, I realize that the real problem had begun long before. My partner and I had decided that our initial goal was to reverse the widely held belief that our new pianist was an impossibly obscure artist; therefore, we would start by avoiding

bebop horns and intricate original tunes. We proposed an all-Ellington trio date: certainly Duke was a universally respected figure and major composer with (as my 1948 article had noted) a valid musical connection with Monk. He agreed without hesitation, despite claiming to be largely unfamiliar with Ellington's music. I insisted that Thelonious pick out the specific repertoire, and eventually he requested several pieces of sheet music. But when we finally arrived at the studio, he proceeded to sit down at the piano and hesitantly begin to work out melody lines, as if he were seeing the material for the first time! I will never know to what extent he was actually learning on the spot, but I'm certain that at least in part he was deliberately testing, demonstrating that he was in command, and probing at this new producer to see how he would react. (There were a few very strong clues: it is clear from his performance that he was quite aware of the quote from Chopin's Funeral March that forms the coda of Ellington's original recording of "Black and Tan Fantasy." And he turned out to be an unbelievably quick study, moving from fumbling note-picking to intriguing improvisation in very little time—although it may have seemed an eternity to me.)

If this was indeed my first lesson at Monk's "school," I was somehow able to pass the test. I reacted calmly and patiently, although that was not at all how I felt. I was in the process of learning that the most important thing is to get the job done, *not* to be the winner in a clash of wills.

I was also becoming aware of the pervasive, though not entirely universal, attitude among jazz musicians that the operators of record companies (even including producers) are—like club-owners—members of another world. If we are not exactly the *enemy*, we are at least the *opposition*. I have always fought against this attitude, often successfully. I do happen to be one of the few jazz producers who can be found listening to the music in clubs with any regularity, and it remains true that some of my warmest friendships have been with people I work with. Thelonious and I never became close friends, but we had a direct and honest relationship throughout his Riverside years. We could talk at times about matters outside music (we had young sons of almost the same age, and compared notes on the difficulties of fatherhood; at this point in time—early 1986—my son Peter happens to be involved in researching and writing a biography of Monk). Above all, I take pride in the fact that Thelonious actively brought young musicians to my attention on more than one occasion. He was the first to tell me about both Wilbur Ware and Johnny Griffin, who became very

important parts of the Riverside picture; and Clark Terry, whom I first met when Monk called him for the final session of the *Brilliant Corners* album, became a vital link in a most important chain—Clark introduced me to the Adderley brothers, and it was Cannonball who first made me aware of Wes Montgomery.

When we moved on from the relative calm of the first trio albums to the hectic sessions involved in the creation of *Brilliant Corners,* the pace of my learning process increased rapidly. Later in these pages I will deal in some detail with the actual circumstances of those and several other tense periods in the recording studio. What I want to emphasize now is that, working with this larger-than-life-size figure named Thelonious Monk, I was going through the most rigorous kind of on-the-job training. I was beginning to learn, under conditions of extreme pressure, the importance of being flexible, of instantly altering plans and schedules, not tightening up when faced with the unexpected, and remembering that a major aspect of the producer's role is to reduce the overall tension. Above all, I was beginning to grasp a fundamental lesson that I suspect many jazz producers never fully appreciate: it is the artist's album, not mine. My *only* objective is to achieve the best possible results, and I must juggle, move, and maneuver myself and everyone else in whatever ways are necessary to reach that goal. It took many more sessions and situations before I thoroughly absorbed these lessons, but my course of instruction most definitely began with Thelonious.

It was during the final day of work on the *Brilliant Corners* album that I first became aware of the value of listening carefully when Monk spoke. (I soon came to realize that he had a remarkable ability to convey deep truths through specific, seemingly casual or even comic comments.) On this occasion, Clark Terry was briefly rehearsing "Bemsha Swing" with the composer. "Don't pay too much attention to what I'm playing behind you now," I heard Thelonious tell him, "because when we record I'll probably be playing something completely different and it'll only confuse you. . . ." It is difficult to imagine a more concise and accurate summation of the fundamentally fluid, ever-changing, improvisatory nature of Monk's approach to music. Similarly, listening to a playback of the blues called "Functional," while making his first solo-piano album, he noted to me: "I sound just like James P. Johnson." Of course he didn't sound *exactly* like the master stride pianist (to whom he had listened often as a teenager; they had lived in the same New York City neighborhood). But it was both an acknowledgement that Thelonious was aware of some of his

most important roots and an announcement that he was satisfied with the way he was playing.

That same solo album also was the occasion of our first major confrontation, from which I learned another major lesson: working on behalf of the artist doesn't mean you have to turn yourself into a doormat. The first scheduled session for this album never took place; after a series of phone calls announcing that he was on his way, Monk finally arrived at the studio well over an hour late and unprepared. I had waited in order to deliver a rather heavy-handed speech: there were certain necessary limits to what my self-respect could allow; I could accept perhaps a half-hour's lateness, but after that he needn't bother to show up at the studio; I would have left. We set a new date; I got there about fifteen minutes early—and Thelonious was waiting for me. He gave me one of his big, slow smiles and quietly asked: "What kept you?"

Monk's first contract with Riverside was for three years, which was a usual maximum period in those days. This meant that it ended in the spring of 1958, after his first Five Spot engagement with John Coltrane had thrust him into the spotlight, but actually before there had been enough fame to encourage a major record label to try to entice our artist away. (It was a common enough procedure to let a small jazz company run the risks of early development and then have the giants move in; Prestige, for example, had lost Miles Davis to Columbia, and the Modern Jazz Quartet and Coltrane to Atlantic.) After some not unfriendly negotiation, his advance payments were more than doubled and his royalty percentage increased, and Thelonious began a second three-year span with our live recordings of the 1958 Five Spot quartet. But long before the end of that contract it was clear that a change would take place. His advisors were convinced that it was time to move on; six years *is* a long time with one label, and Columbia, then in one of its active jazz periods, was beckoning.

I did feel badly about not being able to discuss the future directly with Monk, and I have always felt distressed by the fact that I can say, quite immodestly, that nothing in his subsequent recording career really approached the creativity and variety of the best of his work at Riverside. But the only specific unpleasantness associated with his departure derived from the fact that his second contract had called for several more albums than we had been able to make. I was never fully aware of the circumstances, but Bill Grauer had learned of the existence of tapes professionally recorded—perhaps by the concert promoters, perhaps by radio stations—during two major performances on an early 1961

European tour. The musicians' union had already agreed that we were entitled to further albums from Monk before his contract with Columbia could be approved. Since there is really no way to force an unwilling artist into the studio (particularly *this* artist), use of the existing tapes seemed the best possible solution.

Thelonious and I saw each other from time to time in the New York jazz world of the '60s, but our closeness had been tied to our work together. By 1973 I had moved to San Francisco, and not long after that he retreated into a period of total inactivity and seclusion that lasted until his death in 1982. My last contact with him came about two years before that. On a sudden impulse, during a trip to New York, I telephoned him; the conversation ran approximately like this:

"Thelonious, are you touching the piano at all these days?"

"No, I'm not."

"Do you want to get back to playing?"

"No, I don't."

"I'm only in town for a few days; would you like me to come and visit, to talk about the old days?"

"No, I wouldn't."

When I repeated this to Barry Harris, who was much closer to him in the last years than almost anyone else, the pianist told me: "You were lucky. You got complete sentences. With most people, he just says, 'No.' "

So I am by no means an expert on the last periods of his life. The Thelonious Monk of the years from 1955 to 1961 is the man I really knew, and learned from, and helped as best I could to express his creativity on records. *That* Thelonious was a very unusual human being and extremely good at what he did; I am glad that I was able to know him and work with him.

The Thelonious Monk Sessions

As I add it up, there were twenty-eight different occasions on which I went into a studio (or had a tape machine rolling under "live" club or concert recording conditions) with Thelonious Monk. The earliest time and place was in July 1955 at the legendary original Hackensack, New Jersey, location of Rudy Van Gelder's studio. The last was an almost-unplanned evening late in April 1960, at a San Francisco night club that many years ago was torn down and turned into a parking lot.

Recording Thelonious was never what could be called easy; at times it was almost literally impossible. Not including two postponements, which are *not* counted among the sessions listed here, there were four dates that at the time were considered totally nonproductive—although all four resulted in some material that eventually turned out to be of measurable musical or historical value. (Not to keep you in suspense, they are the sessions numbered 10, 15, 18, and 26–27.)

All of my afternoons and nights of work with Monk are very important elements in my long and still-active career as a producer, and each of them is recalled in these pages. Some occasions are much more vivid and detailed memories than others—and in a number of cases I have been able to supplement my mental pictures with written documentation: my own recording information sheets or rough notes made during a session; the data on original tape boxes; musicians' union recording contracts; album liner notes. In preparing this complete Riverside collection, I have done some additional digging through vaults and old files, and have actually rediscovered some forgotten facts. I have even listened to bits of conversation and argument remaining on some very old reels of tape. All these things have in some cases supported or improved my recollection of how it went, and in others led me to change my mind. In still other instances there simply is no existing documentation, and so some specific points that are by now twenty to twenty-five years old can only be guessed at.

For this reason it hasn't been possible to assemble the collection in its exact original sequence. There is just no way of knowing or recalling the order of recorded performance on some days. But at least the sessions are all in chronological order, and wherever possible they have been accurately recreated as they were recorded.

Of course there are regrettable physical gaps: as will be noted as I describe the sessions, there are several dates from which no outtake material or original tape reels can be found. There are others where—even more frustratingly—some complete or partial tape boxes are on hand but others have disappeared. Over the years I have become quite philosophical about this. When you consider that the original Riverside organization went out of business in 1964, that its tapes were never very sensibly filed to begin with, and that this material has passed through the hands of three additional sets of owners and traveled from New York to California—the really remarkable thing is not that some of it has been lost, but rather that *any* has survived.

Sessions 1 and 2
(July 21 and 27, 1955)

My very first working encounters with Thelonious were relatively uneventful, actually not providing too much warning of some of the tough dates that lay ahead—except of course for that almost-symbolic day preceding the initial session when, as already noted, Kenny Clarke never appeared. So my first scheduled Monk date really never took place—we began our association with a postponement!

I don't recall how Van Gelder was able to fit us in on the very next afternoon. At that time he was doing almost all the engineering for the highly active Prestige, Blue Note, and Savoy labels on a quite regular schedule. (We could not, for example, have gotten a one-day delay of our second session; a full Elmo Hope album was recorded there for Prestige on July 28.)

Once we got started, I remember a fairly steady progression and no special feeling of panic; we undoubtedly completed at least three and possibly four numbers on the 21st, and finished work on the 27th sufficiently early and in good enough spirits to have all three musicians willing to pose outside the studio for the photographs that were used on the original album cover. (The better-known reproduction of the Henri Rousseau "primitive" painting, *The Repast of the Lion,* is from a repackaging that was issued in 1958.) However, since there were probably no notes kept by me during recording (or only scraps of paper that were not retained), and since mid-'50s musicians-union contracts did not call for a list of song titles, there is no paperwork to identify even which tunes were taped each day. I can't remember ever seeing original tape boxes from any of the early trio dates in the tape files at the Riverside offices, so any unused material presumably was destroyed without a second thought. (It must be understood that in those long-ago times we were considering only the problems of the moment: our goal was to record an album; if more takes were needed, it was because the number had not yet been played well enough; such matters as reissues or the use of alternate takes were not even imagined.)

It is actually quite possible that almost everything was completed in little more than one recorded attempt. For I still recall with painful clarity that a great deal of studio time first had to be spent in basic preparation, with Thelonious sitting at the piano reading sheet music and slowly picking out the notes of the Duke Ellington compositions he had agreed to record. Those run-throughs proba-

bly didn't take nearly as long as it must have seemed to me; although Monk began each time as if the tune were totally strange, within a relatively short time he had carved out his own firmly individualized version. And he had also picked accompanists of great value: Oscar Pettiford had never previously recorded with Monk, but he had a specific familiarity with the music from his time as bassist with the Ellington orchestra; Kenny Clarke had first worked with Thelonious in the Minton's era and knew all his tricks. (I can also remember the drummer displaying his own impatience at Monk's making all of us wait for him; Kenny simply picked up the large color comics section of a Sunday newspaper he had found—Van Gelder's studio, you'll recall, was also the living room of his home—and sat there behind it, reading and pointedly ignoring the rehearsing pianist.)

Sessions 3 and 4

(March 17 and April 3, 1956)

Riverside's initial decision had been to devote Monk's first two albums to standard tunes, and we proceeded with this second project without hesitation, uninfluenced by some unfriendly reviewers who felt we had "forced" him to play Ellington (which should show how little they understood Thelonious and his artistic stubbornness). Oscar Pettiford was again the bassist; Kenny Clarke had left the United States to take up long-term residence in Europe, and Art Blakey was called on to replace him. I have always considered Blakey the most appropriate and sympathetic drummer for Monk—ever since first hearing them together on that Blue Note test pressing. So things in the studio were even calmer than before. The leader saw fit to arrive well prepared and apparently felt no need to test me. He had picked much of the material for specific reasons: "Liza" was part of his performance repertoire; the chord changes of "Just You, Just Me" had provided the basis for his composition "Evidence"; he knew and was fond of Fats Waller's "Honeysuckle Rose." I do recall lending him a music book, *The Rodgers and Hart Songbook,* in which he found "You Are Too Beautiful." (That also helps to date the fire that damaged the Monk family apartment early in 1956; the book became a casualty.)

The only musical problems resulted from Pettiford's insistence on bowing an entire chorus of "Tea for Two" as an introduction, even though he was unable to stay in tune. (I later learned that Oscar, for all his greatness, was always bothered by intonation problems when playing *arco.*) I finally convinced him to bow only

the first half, switching to *pizzicato* thereafter; it was possibly my first forceful decision as a producer. What I found most unforgettable was a dramatic non-musical event after the first session. It had snowed, and the roads were frozen and slick as we returned from New Jersey in two automobiles. Pettiford and Blakey led the way; I was with Monk who, unsure of the route, was following them closely. Another car suddenly turned out of a side road into the space between us. Thelonious, alarmed at the thought of losing the others, swerved to pass the newcomer—and skidded sharply across the highway, stopping mere inches short of smashing into a telephone pole, and then calmly informed me: "It's a good thing I was driving. If it had been someone else, we might be dead now." I had never been his passenger before; thereafter I limited my time in that role as much as possible.

Once again there is no documentation of sequence (although again I am certain that at least three numbers were taped the first day), so the selections are presented as on the original album. And as a final note on these trio sessions: although the credits on these and several other early Riverside albums read "produced by Bill Grauer and Orrin Keepnews," this was strictly the result of an initial agreement that my late partner and I would share the billing; actually, he was not on hand on these occasions, and eventually it was made clear that he ran business affairs and I produced the jazz albums.

Session 5

(October 9, 1956)

In many respects this is the real beginning of my work with Monk. When some reviews of the first two albums demonstrated a strange backlash effect, with even writers who had attacked his earlier work as too odd and far-out now criticizing us for denying Thelonious full creative freedom, we felt that our first purpose had been achieved. Riverside could now safely turn to recording him with horns, in original compositions. I had no way of foreseeing how incredibly more difficult this would be for me. Basically, dealing with Monk in full-scale action meant that it was my job to supervise and control the creative flow of recording sessions that involved a perfectionist leader driving a group of sensitive and highly talented artists beyond their limits.

Actually, even this first session of the *Brilliant Corners* album was deceptively easy. The lineup was powerful: Pettiford again; the great Max Roach; young Sonny Rollins, definitely a rising star, with

whom Thelonious had done some impressive recording for Prestige two years earlier; and an alto player who was already my friend and protégé. Ernie Henry had been recommended to Riverside by our first contract artist, pianist Randy Weston; he had already completed his initial album for the label—and had just become a member of Monk's infrequently working quartet. Thelonious did have some new material, but one was a lovely melody named for his friend and patroness, Baroness Koenigswarter, generally known as "Nica," whose full first name is Pannonica, and the other only seemed difficult. Despite its strangely spelled and pronounced title, "Ba-lue Bolivar Ba-lues-are" was only a blues, named after the Bolivar, a West Side apartment hotel where Nica was then living. Monk did make things a bit more difficult by an impromptu addition to the former piece; seeing a celeste in a corner of the studio, he had it set up at right angles to the piano—so that he could play the ballad on celeste with his right hand and, at the same time, on piano with his left. Both numbers were completed in reasonable time, but the seeds of trouble were there: on several occasions, Monk stopped the band at the end of the first chorus of "Pannonica." They seemed uncertain as to what was disturbing him; one of these fragmentary takes has survived and provides the answer. It includes his impatient reminder that they are forgetting the "tag"—the structure is more complicated than the players realize, and Thelonious expects quicker and better execution than he is getting from them.

We were also in an unfamiliar studio, with an engineer lacking in jazz experience. My partner had arbitrarily made long-term arrangements with Reeves Sound Studios and informed me that this was my new working "home." Over the next few years I grew to be quite comfortable there, but in 1956 this was not yet the case.

Session 6

(October 19, 1956)

This is of course a very celebrated session; I have written about it often over the years, and I can still feel the same sense of emotional exhaustion on listening to the recording—and a continuing feeling of surprise that we were able to issue a complete version of "Brilliant Corners." The facts are quite simple: we spent a full four hours in the studio that night, began this piece at least twenty-five times (again there is no written documentation, but I have no doubts about the number), and quit without the quintet having once played it to completion.

The composition is incredibly tricky; it has an off-center rhyth-

mic pattern; and every second chorus is played at doubled tempo. The mere fact that such thorough professionals as Roach and Rollins and Pettiford were unable to satisfy Thelonious says all that need be said about the immensity of their task. As for young Ernie Henry, who tended to feel insecure under the best of circumstances, he soon came close to falling apart, even though Monk tried to ease the pressure by not playing during the alto solo. Late in the evening, Pettiford and the leader exchanged harsh words, leading to an amazing situation that perhaps could only have happened on this night. During one take, we in the control room were sure the bass mike was malfunctioning: Oscar was obviously playing, but not a sound could be heard. The unpleasant truth was that the bassist actually was not playing; he was merely pantomiming quite convincingly! (Not surprisingly, this was the last time Monk and Pettiford ever worked together.)

When we finally quit, I was aware that several portions had been very excitingly executed; I could only hope that the pieces could be welded together—in particular, that one abruptly concluded opening chorus could be used as an ending. Although I had no previous experience with such drastic tape editing, it all succeeded far beyond expectations. The finished product still sounds quite miraculous to me (although I would now like to improve the editing in a couple of places).

Session 7

(December 7, 1956)

Our troubles were of course not yet over. Schedule conflicts kept us apart for a while, and then allowed only one day in which to put Max and Sonny (who were together in Roach's very busy group) into the studio with Monk. Desperate to finish the album, I unwisely scheduled a 10 a.m. start. There were two substitute players; not only was Pettiford replaced—by Miles Davis's young bassist, Paul Chambers—but Ernie Henry was absent. He had accepted a job with Dizzy Gillespie's world-touring big band, which seemed to him an improvement over working occasional weekends with Thelonious. But to Monk this meant that his regular saxophonist had quit; his feelings were hurt, and he responded by replacing Ernie with an experienced young trumpet player (already a veteran of both the Ellington and Basie orchestras) named Clark Terry.

When I reached the studio, only the two newcomers were on hand; gradually the others drifted in, and they began work on a

relatively simple Monk tune, "Bemsha Swing." But we were running short of time—by now I had learned that the studio was promised to another customer at 1 p.m.—and when Roach spotted some tympani in the corner and insisted on adding it to his equipment (possibly in emulation of Monk's piano/celeste pairing), things began to seem hopeless. There were only about twenty minutes left to us when we finished the quintet number, and we remained about five minutes of music short of a respectable total album time. All I could do was ask Thelonious for a once-through unaccompanied standard; he responded with a flawless five and a half minutes of "I Surrender, Dear," and somehow I had survived the making of the first major album of my career.

Sessions 8 and 9
(April 5 and 16, 1957)

I am of course aware that the original liner of the solo album *Thelonious Himself* lists the recording dates as April 12 and 16, and I can think of no reason why I would have misstated the day of the first session, but I am increasingly impressed by physical and logical evidence pointing to the two dates I have listed above. So I choose to take this occasion to change my mind about the recording structure of this album. Once again there are no existing data sheets (I could have saved a lot of mental anguish if I had started my longtime system of recording information sheets just a little sooner). But there are two union contracts, one listing only Monk, the other adding John Coltrane; there are also some original tape boxes. The only dates indicated are April 5 and 16. One box confirms that "Monk's Mood" was recorded on the latter day, and the announcement preceding the touch of false-start-and-talk that's included here reveals that this was "Selection 6" (of a total of eight on the album). I also remember Coltrane and Wilbur Ware arriving at the studio while Monk was at work on a solo number. Turning back to April 5, tape boxes bearing that date contain several alternate takes—for "Ghost of a Chance," "I Should Care," and " 'Round Midnight," respectively identified on tape as Selections 1, 2, and 3. Thus, if at least three belong to April 5 and if one (and probably two) more were made prior to the "Monk's Mood" trio on April 16, there is simply no room for an April 12 session! (If this type of research bores you, please accept my regrets, but surely it's a producer's privilege to attempt to sort out his own past.)

There are other memorable aspects to the making of this album.

It was recorded at my urging—his single solo performances on each of the three earlier albums had convinced me that there was something quite distinctive and important about Monk playing alone. But when he illogically proposed adding two players on one selection (was he duelling with me again?), I knew enough to agree, and consequently we do have this "Monk's Mood," which is unlike anything else he ever recorded and yet also foreshadows the original Five Spot quartet. Some time before the initial session, Thelonious and I had our first open clash of wills, as already described—so it must have been on April 5 that he was waiting in the control room when I arrived. It was on that day that we recorded the half-dozen remarkable "in progress" takes of " 'Round Midnight," which fortunately remained intact through the years to eventually provide a unique and fascinating study of this man at work.

Session 10
(June 25, 1957)

This is the night *before* the marathon *Monk's Music* date, an evening on which Monk is thought not to have accomplished anything. He had come up with the wonderful concept of writing some four-horn arrangements utilizing two close associates who represented the past and the future of the tenor saxophone: Coleman Hawkins and John Coltrane. (I claim important reverse input into this choice: I had proposed recording with several horns, and had mentioned some names that he rejected. But rather than merely saying "no," he had offered his own alternative suggestion, which was Hawk and Trane.) According to reliable sources, he had stayed awake for several days preparing his music, and he arrived at the studio on time for what was scheduled as the first of two consecutive evenings of recording. Almost everyone was there, but Art Blakey did not show up for nearly an hour. By then, Monk was close to losing his fine edge, but he boldly plunged into a new composition, the formidable "Crepuscule with Nellie." (The word means "twilight" and for some reason it was consistently misspelled at Riverside as "crepescule." Nellie was his wife.) I have always recalled that Thelonious collapsed almost immediately; I was quite wrong. The newly discovered first take of "Crepuscule" is not at all unsuccessful; the band is hesitant but seems to understand what is wanted from them, and Monk is full of energy. But it *was* quickly downhill from there. There still exists on tape a strange false start in which I can tell from the tone quality in my

voice, when it is heard after the music breaks off, that I have gone into the studio to urge him on; then it becomes quite clear that he is finished for the evening.

(At this point I turned practical; aware that the band would have to be paid for their time anyhow, I requested a six-man, pianoless blues that was titled "Blues for Tomorrow" when it was later issued on an anthology album of that name.)

Session 11

(June 26, 1957)

"Tomorrow" turned out to be a quite literal reference. Again faced with the prospect of key players going off on tour (coordination of schedules was a major problem for a producer in those active years), we had to try to get the full album recorded the very next night. We succeeded quite well, and I think that on this occasion the feeling of pressure helped. This time we waited a while before tackling "Crepuscule" again, but it seems to have become even more troublesome for the horns.

The order in which this material was recorded reflects how we dealt with our limited working time. The trickier and more tightly arranged pieces came first; then the band could stretch out on a couple of blowing tunes. Fortunately, these didn't need many takes. "Epistrophy" broke down once after an excellent Coltrane solo (this fragment has been reissued more than once), and the second try stayed strong throughout. There was only one complete take of "Well, You Needn't"—the memorable version on which Trane, uncertain of the solo sequence, has to be reminded loudly by Thelonious ("Coltrane, Coltrane") that it's his turn. I'll take credit for not even thinking of interrupting the take at that point; another of the many lessons I learned from Monk can be stated as "when in doubt, let the music continue"—you might just end up, as we did here, with creative results that heavily outweigh the minor mistake.

Session 12

(probably July 1957)

These are of course the only recordings by the historic quartet that played a legendary six-month engagement at the Five Spot in the second half of 1957. That was Monk's triumphant return to the New York club scene; it was a magnificent pairing of two of the very greatest jazz talents; and it is one of my major regrets that the group was not extensively captured on tape. But pride and person-

alities were working against me. Coltrane was then under contract to Prestige Records (it had not been easy to arrange for his appearance on the *Monk's Music* album). This of course was where Thelonious had felt unhappy and ill-treated just before coming to Riverside. When I spoke to Bob Weinstock (the founder and back then still the owner of Prestige) about recording Trane with Monk, he had no objections—provided we would give him reciprocal use of the pianist as a sideman with Coltrane. Thelonious, however, was stubbornly firm: under no circumstances would he *ever* do anything for Prestige. I could not change his position; actually, it was not hard to understand and sympathize with his attitude. Besides, at that time I was hopeful of soon getting Trane to join the Riverside roster. So we did hold this one, technically improper session; later, Coltrane was reluctant to do more; and after a while he left Monk to rejoin Miles Davis, leaving only these three one-take selections as the quartet's legacy.

I remain uncertain of the exact recording date, due to the complete absence of any helpful documentation. In the past I have made some wrong guesses, but I now feel certain that it must have been quite early in the Five Spot engagement. Otherwise, it would not have included Wilbur Ware—for reasons noted in my account of the next sessions with Gerry Mulligan.

Sessions 13 and 14

(August 12 and 13, 1957)

Thelonious had stopped into the Riverside offices one day and casually noted that "Gerry" had left him at the corner. It was my first indication that he and Mulligan were friends, and it led me to investigate the possibility of an unlikely combination that might have considerable musical validity. When both musicians agreed with me, we quickly put together a session, using Monk's current bass player and drummer. Our plan was to do one "simple" quartet date and then later put the two stars into a larger, formally arranged setting. But the blowing session, with two older Monk tunes surrounding the very recent "Rhythm-a-ning," went so smoothly that (learning that the studio was available the next afternoon) we decided to come right back and finish up the same way. There was no pre-planning: just " 'Round Midnight" (because Gerry insisted he had to play it with Thelonious), a Mulligan original, and a standard. The only problem occurred afterwards. August 12, it turned out, had been the last night for the original Monk/Coltrane quartet: at the end of the session on the 13th,

Ware brought his bass back down to the Five Spot, left, and never returned. There were conflicting explanations, but later that evening Ahmed Abdul-Malik was hired as a permanent replacement.

Session 15

(February 25, 1958)

This is another of the "non-productive" evenings mentioned at the beginning of these notes; and I must admit that the performance is largely interesting as a footnote to history. It is the only reminder of an attempted album that would have had Sonny Rollins and Johnny Griffin as a two-tenor team, with Art Blakey as the drummer. But we never even assembled that combination in the studio. I had notified Griffin, Wilbur Ware, and Donald Byrd; Monk was to have contacted Sonny and Art, but neither one appeared (and both later insisted to me quite convincingly that they never had been told). Mid-evening phone calls brought in Pepper Adams and Philly Joe Jones, but after two run-throughs of what was then a new Monk tune, Thelonious decided not to continue with this lineup. Interestingly enough, he had been quite willing to work with Wilbur (it was six months since the bassist had been replaced at the Five Spot), but what really broke up the record date was Ware's stubborn and lengthy insistence to Monk that the bass part on "Coming on the Hudson" was impossible to play.

Sessions 16 and 17

(May 7 and 12, 1958)

I really could not picture Thelonious Monk in the lesser role of a "sideman," and would never have asked him to play that part. But when Clark Terry, whom Thelonious both admired *and* liked, made such a request, the pianist agreed without hesitation, did not ask for a heavy fee (I believe he was paid no more than twice the union-scale minimum), and turned in the most relaxed, happiest, and funkiest Monk performances I ever witnessed. One reason may have been that Clark (who, after all, had worked for years with Duke Ellington) made no special fuss over him—and included only one Monk tune on the album.

Thelonious was particularly pleased with the work of Sam Jones, who was making his first Riverside appearance, and several months later asked Sam to join his group. But the bassist was actually a last-minute replacement. Wilbur Ware had been hired and we spent quite some time the first day waiting for him before making an emergency phone call. (Wilbur's remarkable and origi-

nal talent caused many of us to try to overlook his immense unreliability, but that eventually became impossible.)

Session 18
(July 9, 1958)
When Thelonious returned to the Five Spot late in the spring of '58, his saxophonist was Johnny Griffin, a Riverside artist—so there were no contractual obstacles. Early in July we set up equipment in the club and recorded a full night's work. But when Monk listened a few days later, he began to express small objections, and finally decided he didn't feel right about the whole evening and asked me to set it all aside. By then I knew better than to argue with him about music, so I merely began planning a second attempt. (It took place, quite successfully, the following month.)

Many years later, reviewing the surviving tapes (about half the material remained, plus a complete though rather battered information sheet), I found myself in disagreement with some of Monk's original decisions, and eventually went so far as to include four selections from that night in an album of previously unissued items. Most notable among them was Griffin's only recording of " 'Round Midnight" with its composer. Most peculiar is an unaccompanied, unidentified piano piece. Monk often opened a set with a brief solo version of an old standard, and that's what this sounded like. But no one I asked (musicians, friends of Monk, old-song experts) could come up with a title or composer, nor has anyone come along since it was first issued in 1984.

One more previously unheard number is worth noting. "Bye-ya" closed out the final set that evening; it's an earlier Monk composition that was otherwise never recorded for Riverside, and it is distinguished by the presence of guest drummer Art Blakey. Overall, things are rather sloppy, and Griffin's solo goes on too long. But Thelonious follows with a wonderfully concise solo; this is a rare glimpse of the Monk/Blakey team in spontaneous live action; and above all it offers a unique chunk of jazz reality—some good friends hanging out together in a club very late at night, and surely paying little or no attention to the tape machine.

Session 19
(August 7, 1958)
On this return trip with recording equipment, everything went well at the Five Spot. I was hoping to get two albums from the night's work, and asked Thelonious to play a wide variety of material

rather than just repeating a few throughout the evening (which is the safer and more usual way of recording under working conditions). The gamble paid off; the quartet was particularly close-knit, and we found ourselves with—in addition to the ever-present closing theme, "Epistrophy"—eleven fully acceptable selections. Once again (but for the *last* time), I can find no helpful paper work and almost no tape boxes—but it's hardly possible that there was more music than this, all originally divided between the *Thelonious in Action* and *Misterioso* albums.

Session 20
(February 28, 1959)

Three decades ago, it must be remembered, a jazz presentation in a major New York concert hall was still most unusual. Even with Monk's new-found popularity, the idea of offering full-band arrangements of his strange music was too daring for any professional promoter—this evening at Town Hall was put on by Monk's close friend Jules Colomby. And there was a full house!

The scores were the work of Hall Overton, in close cooperation with the composer. Six strong horn players were added to the current quartet (Charlie Rouse had just begun his eleven years as Monk's tenor player), and there was an unusual series of long and detailed rehearsals, rigorously supervised by Thelonious. So when we set up to record that night, there was no reason to expect trouble. Actually, we encountered only one problem, but it was a classic:

Staff engineer Ray Fowler and I were working just offstage, using a single tape machine. Accordingly, I asked Monk to glance at me before each number, to see if we needed a momentary delay to load a new reel of tape. He neglected to check only once—but it *was* during a reel change, so that the first several bars of "Little Rootie Tootie" were not recorded. At the first opportunity, I explained the problem to Thelonious, whose solution was direct, outlandish, and quite helpful. At the end of the scheduled program, with the audience screaming for an encore, he calmly announced that the recording engineers had "loused up" and proceeded to repeat the entire number. The start of the encore, of course, doubles as the opening of both versions here.

The concert actually began with three quartet numbers. At the time, knowing that there would be enough orchestral material for a full album, we used this first segment only to work on the recording balance. Many years later, I found that the unused quartet reel

had survived. The performances were exciting (Monk was clearly full of enthusiasm on this triumphant night), and the sound actually much better than remembered. The material was easily put into shape for belated issuance. (There are frequent rumors about two additional quartet numbers. I do not remember any; I would very much doubt that there could have been as many as five small-group pieces on what was billed as an orchestra concert; and above all this is everything that was recorded that night.)

There has also been some confusion about "Thelonious." The original Riverside album begins with a shortened version; Monk was not happy with his chorus (which is the only solo), and we decided to use only the final ensemble chorus, presented as a sort of opening theme. The full version actually turned up on a late-1960s German reissue album; hearing about this finally led me to search for and uncover that tape in the vaults. Apparently it had survived without my being aware of it and had mistakenly been copied for that reissue. A very awkward edit was clearly audible in the piano solo—presumably the result of someone's attempt to repair whatever had initially bothered Thelonious. I don't recall whether it had been a technical recording flaw or a performance error. However, a few years ago I re-edited and basically smoothed over the original problem so that the best possible full-length version could be issued.

Sessions 21, 22, and 23
(June 1, 2, and 4, 1959)

A few months later, Monk's working group and one guest went into the studio for what almost turned out to be an uneventful group of sessions. This was an ideal way to record Thelonious—three men he was quite used to, plus the adventure of one newcomer. Monk had never played with Thad Jones before, but this was the kind of trumpet player who could meet his tough standards: like Clark Terry or Donald Byrd, Thad was technically capable of handling the complexities of the music and was also an imaginative improvisor.

My recording information cards tell me that we spent the entire first afternoon on the three versions of "Played Twice." It was a new composition, and Thelonious was obviously in his demanding mood: years later, I find all the takes to be of value (but they are far from identical, and I'm delighted that they all exist). Apparently we had only planned a short session; we were scheduled again for the next day, and this time ran easily through three

relatively familiar Monk pieces. At this point he informed me that we "must have enough" for an album, and he was—just barely—correct. These four add up to almost thirty-eight minutes; but I felt that this much time and only four selections made up a pretty skimpy total. I insisted on one more piece, preferably a new work, and was willing to call another session just for that purpose.

Presumably the extremely tricky "Jackie-ing" (named for Monk's niece) was written, or at least completed, in two days. It was ready for the third date, but that one-tune session was by no means uncomplicated. To begin with, Thelonious showed up without the music; he had left the just-finished parts on Nica's piano, but was sure he could just show everyone what to play. After he struck a few notes and sang a few more, there was a rebellion. The musicians insisted on having it in writing, and I quickly agreed to the delay. It was at least an hour before he returned, and even then it was not routine. I can remember Thad, who had a reputation for being able to sight-read *anything,* struggling through a couple of unsuccessful takes—unfortunately, that reel of tape has not survived—but eventually they did conquer what is clearly one of Monk's most memorably difficult pieces.

Sessions 24 and 25
(October 21 and 22, 1959)

This turned out to be as peaceful as a Monk date could possibly be, with no other musicians involved and none of the friends and hangers-on that you'd find on the New York scene. It took place only because of a coincidence: I was scheduled to go to San Francisco for a "live" recording of Cannonball Adderley's new band, and learned that Thelonious was to make his very first appearance in that city the following week. Since he would have only a pick-up band (Charlie Rouse, plus a bassist and drummer from Los Angeles), it seemed a good opportunity for something we had been considering for some some—a follow-up to his impressive *Thelonious Himself* solo album of 1957.

I was in good spirits following the highly charged Adderley dates: Thelonious was subdued (his wife was recuperating in a Los Angeles hospital following major surgery) but in an unusually genial and cooperative mood. He had his material almost completely ready, including four of his earlier compositions and two new ones. The only oddity was a ridiculous item from the '20s that he had just come across in an old songbook: "There's Danger in Your Eyes, Cherie." His outrageous interpretation of this one did take some

preparation and two takes—making it the only one of ten selections that was performed more than once!

This was not because we were in any hurry. Having been unable to find a suitable recording studio, we were using the stage of a spacious meeting hall; there was no time pressure. It's just that everything fell into place effortlessly; on the first of two scheduled afternoons, six tunes (including the two-take number) were completed. Accordingly, we delayed the start of the second session so that Monk could take me to lunch, which he ordered very knowledgeably at a nearby Italian restaurant.

Sessions 26 and 27

(April 28 and 29, 1960)

My next encounter with Monk, however, was in sharp contrast, even though it took place in the same city. This collection includes the very first appearance of material from an ill-fated attempted collaboration between Thelonious and the late Shelly Manne. It had not been my idea. During a European trip, my colleague Bill Grauer (who hardly ever interfered in jazz production) had run into both men at jazz festivals and had asked Monk's opinion of Shelly. "He can play," Thelonious said, which is about the same as answering "I'm fine" when a casual acquaintance begins a conversation by politely asking about your health. But somehow Grauer took this as approval, and went on to enlist Shelly's enthusiastic agreement and to get our friend Les Koenig to accept the idea of two co-leader dates, one for Riverside and one for his Contemporary label (where Shelly had been a big-selling artist ever since the 1957 Manne/Previn *My Fair Lady* album). I suppose I should have resisted, but Grauer could be a *very* persuasive man, and Shelly was a very good drummer and had been part of the early bebop scene on New York's Fifty-second Street. I also trusted Monk and his stubborn musical honesty; if he hadn't objected, how could I?

I did devise what I thought was a way of turning this into a fairly normal Monk date. It would be convenient to record on the West Coast, during Monk's return engagement at the Blackhawk in San Francisco, so I decided on combining Charlie Rouse and John Ore (Monk's bassist at the time) with two other horn players with Eastern jazz associations who were then in Los Angeles. Harold Land had of course worked with the Clifford Brown/Max Roach band; Joe Gordon had the added advantage of being part of Manne's current group. Since I still didn't have a preferred studio, we arranged to set up in the Blackhawk itself and record during

the afternoon. (I had brought along Riverside's engineer, Ray Fowler.) But from the start we were in trouble. Thelonious had a bad cold and was irritable; Shelly was *too* respectful. When he kept insisting that Monk was the master and should make the basic decisions, I knew Thelonious well enough to visualize his thoughts: "If I'm the top man, how come we share the billing?"

There was never any open hostility, but neither was there any musical meshing. Let's just say that the stale air and beer of the Five Spot doesn't interact with California open air and fresh orange juice, or that Manne could not go back to swinging in the way he had on Dizzy Gillespie's first Guild date in 1945. On the first day we made an acceptable version of a new Monk tune and a rather rambling "Just You, Just Me"—which had been on the second trio date back in '56. On the second day there was an unexceptional " 'Round Midnight," and then Shelly asked to be excused. He knew it wasn't happening well enough, and thought the proper thing to do was to stop. I agreed. Over the years we made smiling reference to this occasion, and I never seriously thought about issuing the material. (But with both artists dead, and above all considering the special retrospective nature of what was billed as the *"complete"* Monk-on-Riverside collection, I did think it suitable to include these often talked-about but previously unheard performances.)

Session 28
(April 29, 1960)

At mid-afternoon of this day, I felt totally frustrated. My engineer and I had traveled cross-country, worked hard, and would have absolutely nothing to show for it. Then I turned to Monk with the beginnings of a salvage idea in mind. My first words were probably pretty angry: he had kept the date from happening properly by not even trying to compromise with his co-leader; more than that, he must have known all along that he really didn't want to do it, so why hadn't he spoken up and vetoed the project months ago? Then I cooled down and developed my plan: add Land and Gordon to the regular quartet as special one-night guests and, making use of the equipment already in place, record in performance at the Blackhawk. Monk agreed, picked out a handful of not-*too*-difficult compositions, and then was shipped back to his hotel room to fight his cold with rest and Vitamin C pills, with Rouse assigned the task of making sure the other two horns knew the required chord changes.

As could happen when Monk was willing to admit he had been in the wrong, he became incredibly cooperative. The club owner informed me that it was the only night all week Thelonious showed up on time; on the bandstand he was all business; between sets he sat down at the tape machine with headphones and checked out the performances; and at the start of the second set he actually spoke to the audience, advising them not to be "alarmed" if some repertoire was repeated, "because we're recording."

There is an explanation for the dual titling of the new tune he had written for this date, first issued as "Worry Later" but subsequently known as "San Francisco Holiday." During rehearsal earlier in the week, I had asked the composer if he wanted to name his new tune now, or worry about it later. "Worry later" was the response—and that, I decided, was an ideal title. But when Monk did worry about it some time later, he chose to rename the piece to commemorate the fact that Nellie and their two children had been with him on this trip, and it became "San Francisco Holiday."